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ABSTRACT

This study examines the suspected positive outcomes of participating as a volunteer in a peer education program. To address a need for empirical studies, the authors conducted a qualitative evaluation of 21 narratives written by graduating educators. Three raters analyzed these narratives through content analysis, supported by strong inter-rater reliabilities. Educators freely mentioned the targeted outcome variables at these rates: factual knowledge (57%), helping others (57%), friendships (48%), personal growth (38%), positive regard for the instructor (33%), skills (24%) and decision-making (5%). Overall, results support the positive impact of participating as a peer educator and direct future quantitative outcome research. (Author)

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Positive Outcomes of Volunteering as a Peer Educator: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract

This study examines the suspected positive outcomes of participating as a volunteer in a peer education program. To address a need for empirical studies, we conducted a qualitative evaluation of 21 narratives written by graduating educators. Three raters analyzed these narratives through content analysis, supported by strong inter-rater reliabilities. Educators freely mentioned the targeted outcome variables at these rates: factual knowledge (57%), helping others (57%), friendships (48%), personal growth (38%), positive regard for the instructor (33%), skills (24%) and decision-making (5%). Overall, results support the positive impact of participating as a peer educator and direct future quantitative outcome research.

Index terms: Peer Education, Outcome, Health Education, College Students

Positive Outcomes of Volunteering as a Peer Educator: A Qualitative Study

Peer health educators are students who are trained to provide health education to fellow students. Many colleges and universities have taken advantage of peer educators to assist in teaching and modeling positive health behaviors. Peer educators are cost effective as volunteers,[1] and recent findings indicate that nearly seventy-eight percent of colleges and universities include peer education programs as part of their student health initiatives.[1]

The concept of peer education stems from social learning theory, in that people should learn best from models they regard as similar to themselves. Experience shows that having peer educators who are similar to the target audience increases the chances of the message being successfully conveyed.[2] Just as people readily learn risky behaviors from members of their peer groups, they can also learn positive health practices when provided with proper peer role models. Students trust their peers as sources of information, and they are more likely to change their attitudes and behaviors if messages come from peers who presumably understand their experiences.[3]

Peer educators are trained to serve as teachers and program leaders, but they also function as role models in their college communities.[3] According to Fabiano,[2] one goal of peer education is to shift from an individual perspective to a community perspective. Peer education facilitates a, "more complex, interrelated model of individuals who see their health intricately connected to the health of others and the health of communities in which they live". [4] Essentially, peer education programs assume that peer educators better themselves and become positive role models for the student body.

Although peer education and its functional assumptions have been widely adopted, literature supporting these programs is limited. Little solid research exists to document the effectiveness of peer education programs. Educators are expected to better themselves through training to serve as role models for their communities; therefore, research should document the beneficial effects that peer education programs have on the peer educators themselves.

In support of the positive outcomes of volunteering as a peer educator, Klein and colleagues[1] found that peer education programs are beneficial for the educator because they allow the peer educator to gain knowledge and training, which can influence positive health behavior change. Male peer educators reduced their sexually risky behavior as a result of participating in as an educator.[4] According to a study by Badura, Millard, Peluso, & Ortman[5], upon completing a semester of peer education training, students showed marked improvement in leadership skills, a significant increase in their health related knowledge, and a positive impact on their own health behaviors.

Limited research has shown that knowledge, skills, and behaviors are impacted as a result of the peer educator experience. However, additional research is clearly needed to further identify and support the benefits of peer education if colleges and universities are to continue supporting the programs. In this study, we will evaluate the positive effects of participating as a peer educator at Creighton University by examining exit narratives obtained from educators upon their graduation from the university.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study included 21 peer educators who graduated from Creighton University. In order to be included in this study, the student must have fulfilled three inclusion criteria. First, the student must have successfully completed a one semester training course in peer education. Second, the student must have actively participated as a volunteer in the peer education program. Third, the student must have written a brief exit narrative about the peer education program at the time of his or her graduation from the university. The modal age for educators was 22 years old, and the majority of participants were female.

Materials

The current study consisted of a qualitative analysis of the peer educator exit narratives. In these graduation narratives, educators were asked to briefly comment on the benefit(s) of their participation in the peer education program. No further directions were given, and the resulting narratives ranged from one short sentence in length to a full double-spaced typed page of comments. We included all exit narratives collected from graduating peer educators from the years 1997-2001 in this study.

Procedures

The Institutional Review Board at Creighton University approved the use of the exit narratives that had been previously collected as an informal evaluation of the peer education program for analysis in this qualitative study. In the current study, three independent raters examined the exit narratives for the presence of seven outcome variables. The outcome variables of interest included gaining factual knowledge

(Knowledge), helping others (Helping), establishing peer friendships (Friendship), obtaining personal growth (Growth), having positive regard for the instructor (Instructor), attaining new skills (Skills), and improving decision-making ability (Decision).

Results

Overall, raters were consistent in their judgements about the presence of the study variables and the variables of interest were reported frequently in the peer educator exit narratives.

To establish evidence of inter-rater reliability, we calculated the percent agreement and coefficient alpha for each of the study variables. Percent agreement reflects the number of times all three judges agreed upon a classification of a variable as present or absent divided by the total number of their agreements and disagreements, multiplied by 100. Because we used three raters, the percent agreement expected by chance is 25%; therefore, agreement greater than 25% supports consistency among the raters. Percent agreements for each of the study variables were: Knowledge = 90%, Helping = 86%, Friendship = 90%, Growth = 62%, Instructor = 100%, Skills = 81%, and Decision = 90%. Next, we calculated coefficient alphas, using the three raters as items, to evaluate the degree of rater consistency. The coefficient alphas for the study variables follow: Knowledge = 0.96, Helping = 0.93, Friendship = 0.95, Growth = 0.69, Instructor = 1.00, Skills = 0.87, and Decision = 0.80.

Since this is an exploratory study, we formulated no formal hypotheses about the prevalence of the study variables. Our goals were to determine the frequency at which each variable was reported and to use this baseline frequency information to direct future studies.

In order to calculate the frequency at which each variable appeared in the exit narratives, we determined that the study variable was present if at least two of the three raters judged it to be present. The number of target variables reported in each narrative ranged from 0 to 6 ($\underline{M}$ = 2.62, $\underline{SD}$ =1.53). The variables reported at the highest frequency were Knowledge and Helping, both of which were identified in 57% of the narratives. Forty-eight percent of the narratives mentioned Friendship, and 38% of the narratives indicated Growth. Positive regard for the Instructor was noted in 33% of the narratives, and the development of new Skills was reflected in 24% of narratives. Decision making ability was recorded least frequently in only 5% of the narratives.

Comments

The results of this qualitative study document the presence of a variety of positive outcomes of participating as a peer educator. The strong degree of inter-rater agreement and reliability for six of the seven study variables, with the exception of Growth, indicate that our methodology can clearly document the presence or absence of the study variables. Personal growth appears to be a difficult concept to operationalize, and future research should attempt to better define this important and frequently noted benefit.

The frequency of reported outcomes for the target variables indicates that peer education has a strong positive impact on student volunteers. The results provide confirmation consistent with previous literature indicating that peer educators benefit greatly from the peer education experience.[1,4,5,6]

Through our investigation, we identified and documented a number of beneficial outcomes that students attributed to their peer education experience. As expected, the peer education program provides the students with a strong foundation of health-related

facts and information. The opportunity to help others and provide a positive societal contribution was another benefit of their participation in the program. For example, a narrative explained that, "I personally feel that I had a positive impact on many students' lives, which makes me feel good."

Consistent with the social aspects of volunteering, being a peer educator not only allowed students to have contact with their audiences, but also with each other. Nearly half the educators reported that they developed stronger and better friendships with their peers, and many peer educators felt that meeting new and different people was a strong benefit of participation. Similarly, peer educators indicated that the strong relationship they developed with the program instructor was a positive outcome of their participation.

Personal growth is an important developmental task during the college years. Our results indicate that, although personal growth proved difficult to operationalize, many students reported that they grew as a result of the peer educator experience. The opportunity to learn about themselves, their peers, and the issues surrounding them facilitated personal growth. For example, one educator wrote, "I have grown into a more responsible and sensitive person." Additionally, educators indicated that their skills, including public speaking, improved as a result of participation.

Although improved decision-making ability is a goal of the peer education training program, only one student indicated that decision-making ability was one of the strongest benefits to the program. Perhaps, students did improve decision-making; however, when identifying one or more benefits to participation, this target variable did not stand out as a major gain when compared to the more visible outcomes of increased

knowledge and social contacts. Future studies should more carefully explore decision-making as an outcome peer education.

Overall, our qualitative evidence supports the generally held belief that participation as a peer educator is beneficial for the volunteer. Peer education programs offer students opportunities to develop and learn a variety of positive characteristics, attitudes, and behaviors.

Our content analysis approach provides necessary empirical support for many positive outcomes of participating as a volunteer peer educator; however, this qualitative study has limitations that should drive future research. First, because the sample was collected from only one university, the results cannot be necessarily generalized to all peer education experiences. Future studies should obtain data from multiple peer education programs at colleges and universities throughout the country. Second, the exit narratives were originally designed as program evaluation information for the instructor, consequently an expectation of a positive response may have biased the narratives. Future research should conduct an unbiased program evaluation through neutrally worded, carefully constructed questions. Third, by design, this study was a one time, qualitative, exploratory study. Future quantitative research should more formally examine the variables documented in this study including knowledge, helping others, developing friendships with peers and program directors, personal growth, and improved skills. Hopefully this study will help direct future research endeavors to further address the need for outcome data supporting the efficacy of peer education programs.

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